

New Mission Reflects Ellsworth's Vital Role in National Security

By Rep. Stephanie Herseth Sandlin

Earlier this week, I was extremely pleased to receive a call from General Norton Schwartz, Air Force Chief of Staff informing me that Ellsworth Air Force Base will receive a significant new mission: a squadron of operators for Remotely Piloted Aircraft (RPA).

This was an important decision for Ellsworth, and one that will provide considerable benefits to our state's economy and national security. The mission will bring 280 new personnel to Ellsworth and gives the base a mission that is on the forefront of modern military technology and operations. The announcement was a true victory for South Dakota, and I was pleased to work with the rest of the congressional delegation and the Air Force to make the case for mission growth at Ellsworth.

The new mission is slated to become operational by May 12, 2012, but personnel will arrive and construction will begin well in advance. Ellsworth won't actually host the unmanned planes themselves. The planes will be based and maintained at their forward operating bases near their primary areas of operation. However, the drones will be flown from Ellsworth as pilots control the aircraft through a secure data-link.

Some of the first activity with this new mission will come as Ellsworth begins construction of the needed communications infrastructure, such as the installation and upgrade of links to the Joint Worldwide Intelligence Communications System (JWICS), the Department of Defense's secure high-speed communications network. Ellsworth will not have to construct any new buildings for the mission, but will have to refurbish several existing facilities.

The personnel to operate the drones are slated to begin arriving in January of 2012 with equipment and flight testing being conducted in March and April of that year before official operations begin in May.

Air Force officials have told me that the focus of the squadron at Ellsworth will be on the MQ-9 planes, nicknamed Reapers. The Reapers are more advanced than the older Predators (MQ-1), and play an increasingly important role in modern combat operations.

With external fuel tanks and carrying a thousand pounds of munitions, a Reaper can stay aloft up to 42 hours, with a range of over 3,000 miles. It can fulfill a number of critical missions – all designed to keep U.S. servicemembers safe. It can conduct long-endurance, high-altitude surveillance and intelligence gathering operations, or provide direct combat support for troops or strikes against critical targets.

When used in the ongoing conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Air Force fully integrates the use of Reapers and Predators into missions alongside manned aircraft, including the B-1s currently based at Ellsworth. The needed synergy between manned and unmanned planes, and Ellsworth's already-earned expertise in this area of operations, is just another reason why Ellsworth was the perfect candidate for this mission.

Over the past year, I have had a series of conversations with senior Air Force leadership including General Schwartz, Air Force Secretary Michael Donley, Under Secretary of the Air Force Erin Conaton, and General William Fraser, head of Air Combat Command to stress Ellsworth's importance to our national security, as well as the need to sustain and modernize our nation's air fleet.

I will continue my efforts to discuss Ellsworth with the key decision makers in the Pentagon, ensuring that South Dakota's voice is heard when critical decisions about our national security are made.

South Dakota has always been a state that puts partisan politics aside to support our military. This week, that strong bipartisan support played a critical role in providing a boost to our state's economy and nation's security. We've worked together to remove Ellsworth from the BRAC list, to secure necessary resources, and to bring new missions.

I look forward to continuing to work with the Ellsworth Task Force, the Ellsworth Development

Authority, as well as the state's congressional delegation and other local leaders and officials to support Ellsworth as an irreplaceable part of our national security.
